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ABSTRACT

After much discussion and several false starts, Nassau Community College (New York) has developed a two-course core curriculum designed to cover significant material from the sciences, social sciences, and humanities in practical proportions. The first course in the sequence, "Exploring Nature and Society," deals with Perceptions of the Physical World, Views of Human Nature, Authority and the Individual, and the Search for Meaning in the Universe. The second course, "Ideas and Expression in the Arts," looks at Expressions of the Physical World: Realism to Abstraction, Expressing the Human Condition: Symbolism, Authority and the Individual: The Drama of Protest, and the Beautiful and the Sublime. To help students deal with the abstract concepts presented in the course, each major unit begins with a discussion of a central, usually contemporary, figure and of a question that the individual might ask. For example, Martin Luther King is the central figure for the unit on Authority and the Individual, and his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" serves as the basis for a discussion of the question, "how should an individual behave when in conflict with authority?" To prepare instructors to teach the courses, a one-semester faculty seminar has been developed to enable teachers to teach each other, refine course content, become familiar with the materials, and determine means of presenting information. The courses will not be team taught, the parameters of the program will remain flexible in order to maintain freshness, and the cross-disciplinary thematic structure of the course will emphasize connections and the integration of material. Students will be advised to take the courses as early as possible after completing all remedial and developmental work. (MDB)

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MOVING A GRAVEYARD

Joan Sevick
Nassau Community College
April 1988

Paper presented at the Conference on General Education and the Two-Year College, April 22-23, 1988, Hamburg, New York

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MOVING A GRAVEYARD

Two years ago, when Nassau was planning its second college-wide colloquium on Core Curriculum, I contacted about 30 colleges on the east coast to find out how many of them were implementing Core courses. Very few of them actually had a Core in place, and even when they were optimistic, no one said it was easy. I remember one fellow saying, "You know what it's like to revise a curriculum, it's like trying to move a graveyard!" I've thought about that many times since then while I sat, like impatience on a tomb, trying to wrench some old bone away from a perfectly contented faculty member who cried, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." (Not a member of the English department, of course.) We have been talking about Core at Nassau for at least five years now and there are still some people who hope the idea will go away. We've had at least 4 committees working on Core, we have a bi-semester Core Update Newsletter that apparently only the converted take the time to read, and we've even had a song in the annual faculty musical about it: to the tune of "Trouble" from *Music Man*; "You're gonna have trouble, a whole lotta trouble, that starts with T and that rhymes with C and that stands for CORE." (I was comparing notes with Joanne Reitano who spoke this morning and we're thinking of writing a book on the trials and tribulations of trying to implement a Core. Send us your anecdotes.)

Well, we know faculty members are traditionally conservative. A sociological study would probably find that they are traditionally paranoid, and have good reason to be. Curriculum reform comes slowly. We are fortunate at Nassau to have a President and Vice President for Academic Affairs who want to see curriculum revision almost as much as we radicals do. Now that his brother is out of the presidential race, our Academic Dean Don Gephardt has come back and has joined the Core fight as well. We think we have a good plan, academically sound and realistic as well, and we have applied for an NEH grant to help us get it established college-wide over the next three years. We also have two companies thinking about publishing the textbook that will come out of the program--though so far we've only been promised "lunch." But that's encouraging. I hear someone has started production of T-shirts that say NCC GOES CORE. Why not. These are exciting times.

Let me describe the object of the plan, what we hope it will accomplish, and how we intend to implement it.

We had two previous proposals that failed to capture the academic imagination at Nassau, and a dialectic seems to

have been at work. The first plan was the yellowbellied distribution requirement compromise (I can say this because no one from Nassau is here). This was a version of our Graduation Requirements, now narrowly undistributed, the cafeteria-style core that many schools have had to settle for because it least disturbs the existimg curriculum. We agree with Ethyle Wolfe, who designed the Core at Brooklyn College, that distribution requirements merely masquerade as Core and offer only a fragmented introduction to a Liberal Arts education. Our ideal has always been to devise a Core that would provide a common experience for all our students, offering career and transferring students a shared intellectual foundation on which to build their special interests.

When the cafeteria Core failed to pass the Curriculum Committee, we regrouped and came up with the other extreme, an ambitious one-year sequence covering everything from King Tut to T.S. Eliot, a sort of great books plus, or quantum leap into the culture of Western Civilization. Before taking this course to a college-wide vote we tried it out on our Department Chairs who all shrieked in unison: "My students don't need to know all this stuff!" Back to the drawing board.

This was not merely a waste of time. By understanding what was wrong with these proposals, we knew what we had to avoid:

a) attempting to cover too much chronology and territory, b) overlapping history, literature and philosophy courses without offering much that was obviously new, c) not covering different methods of inquiry or attempting to integrate them, d) not identifying specific skills that students could transfer to other studies, and e) not showing how course content was relevant to contemporary life.

We eventually decided that a thematic approach would provide the structure necessary to cover significant material in practical proportions. But not just any old thematic approach. We spent hours trying to shake off our disciplinary prejudices and discarded the predictable "sex and the family," " third world revolutions" and "literature of initiation," those headings that turn up in all the Freshman Composition Book clones. One late afternoon, as we sat exhausted and mute, our Union representative, who is on the Task Force only to see that we don't violate the contract, said, "Well really, there are only four areas of human inquiry." "OH? What are those," we sneered suspiciously. "Nature, Human Nature, Society, and the Universe." "Hmm," we muttered, and our tired brains started to work again.

You have the result before you. The two courses COR I and COR II follow the same four-part structure: Nature, Human Nature, Society and the Individual, and the Meaning of the Universe. COR I Exploring Nature and Society will be taught by faculty from the sciences, math, and social

science departments, including Sociology, Psychology, History, and Philosophy. The four sections of the course are 1. Perceptions of the Physical World; 2. Views of Human Nature; 3. Authority and the Individual; and 4. Search for Meaning in the Universe. COR II Ideas and Expression in the Arts will be taught by faculty from English, Art, Music, Theater, Communications, Philosophy, and at the moment one member of the Marketing Department. The sections in this course are called 1. Expressing the Physical World: Realism to Abstraction; 2. Expressing the Human condition: Symbolism; 3 Authority and the Individual: The Drama of Protest; and 4. The Beautiful and the Sublime. We have tried to balance all the arts, including film, dance and a variety of music, in these sections.

Our students have difficulty with abstraction, as you know, and so to facilitate their dealing with abstract ideas without simplifying or reducing them, we thought that a central figure in each section would serve to humanize and focus the material. Not only do we begin with an individual, as contemporary a figure as possible, but we start our investigation with a QUESTION that individual might have asked. Thus, "How should an individual behave when in conflict with authority?" is a question which gets us into a discussion of Martin Luther King's situation. Students will read King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, but in order to fully understand the situation, King will have to be seen in a historical and ideological CONTEXT. To accomplish this, students will read works which define the issues (Plato, the Old and New Testaments, Locke, Jefferson, Marx, Thoreau, Gandhi, Wollstonecraft). Once students see the issues clearly, they can move on to APPLY this information to contemporary problems: racism, feminism, political parties, South Africa, South America, etc. This pattern is followed throughout both Core courses: The Area of Inquiry, The Central Figure, The *Essential Question, The Context,* and *The Application to Contemporary Issues.*

Now that we have this neat, original multi-disciplinary scheme, we are convinced that there is no faculty member who is ready to teach the course, no matter how expert he is in his own field. As a matter of fact, that is one of the best features of the plan. Teachers will have to fold away their old lecture notes and address themselves to digesting and integrating this new material. We are all starting fresh and from the same position and the hope is that this will invigorate and inspire our faculty as well as provide a good foundation for our students.

This brings me to our Faculty Seminars which will be starting in the fall, and if we get our NEH grant, continue for the next three years. All faculty members will prepare to teach the Core courses by participating in a one-semester Faculty Seminar, for which they will receive three released hours. We have selected sixteen faculty members for the fall and the administration is providing the released time this initial semester. During the seminar faculty members will in

effect be teaching the course to each other, refining the content, becoming familiar with the material, determining how the material will be presented, what ideas should be emphasized, the order of assignments, specific classroom activities, homework, museum trips, and testing necessary. After the seminar, while they are teaching the courses, Core faculty will continue to meet weekly for discussion and on-going evaluation of the project.

Some General comments:

1. The courses will not be team-taught. We expect that the seminar meetings will supply all the exciting cross-fertilization of team cooperation without the inflexibility and inertia that often arises (to say nothing of budgetary problems). Although some members might want to teach both courses, it is more likely that faculty members will teach either COR I or COR II, depending on which is closest to their own discipline.

2. Although the major themes and readings will be determined by the Faculty Seminars, there will be enough flexibility to accomodate additional readings and a variety of teaching techniques. The multi-disciplinary structure will allow each faculty member to approacb the material from a fresh perspective, but bring to it the background and experience of his/her own field.

3. Core courses will not be watered-down introductory courses, nor will they duplicate any department's offering. The four-part thematic organization will cut across all disciplines and provide connections and integration of material not in the present curriculum.

4. Students will be advised to take the Core courses as soon as possible in their academic program.

5. Students must have completed all remedial and developmental courses before registering for the Core courses.

6. All degree candidates will be required to take the Core sequence. We feel strongly about this. The Core is especially important for our career students. In a world of accelerating personal, social and economic change, it becomes our responsibility to provide all students with the opportunity to address the challenges of modern life. We read that people change jobs on an average of 6 times during their lives, and we know that the technologies they are training for now will be obsolete before they graduate. In designing the Core our goal has been to give students the opportunity to ask the basic questions that every generation must address. In this fiercely competetive world they must learn to think, perceive, and evaluate reasonably, they must learn to see relationships between changing perceptions and enduring values. The connections made by inquiry into the effects of change covered by the CORE courses will allow students to make informed, constructive choices. We feel confident about this. We're ready for the 21st Century.

Nassau Community College

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COR I and COR II

I EXPLORING NATURE AND SOCIETY

1. Perceptions of the Physical World

Central Figure: Charles Darwin

Essential Question: *What was the significance of the concept of evolution and how did it influence scientific thought?* ***Context***: Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Islamic contributions to medicine and math, Einstein, Wilson; essays by Huxley, Spencer, Snow, Gould, Schell, Russell. ***Application***: How evolutionary thought influenced other disciplines; Social Darwinism; contemporary issues such as genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, creationism, animal language, nuclear warfare, space flight, toxic waste, disease, endangered species.
Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

2. Views of Human Nature

Central Figure: Sigmund Freud

Essential Question: *How did ideas about the subconscious change our views of human nature?* ***Context***: Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Mill, Wollstonecraft, Skinner, Mead, Horney. ***Application***: How Freud's insights are reflected in our ideas of personality, sex, relation of the sexes, family structure, insanity, dreams, repression, communal myth, the individual in civilization.
Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*.

3. Authority and the Individual

Central Figure: Martin Luther King

Essential Question: *How should an individual behave when in conflict with authority?* ***Context***: Plato, Locke, Jefferson, Thoreau, Gandhi, Wollstonecraft, Smith, Marx, Fanon. ***Application***:

revolution, passive resistance, power structures in society, political parties, economic pressures; South Africa, South America; racism; issues of equality and freedom.
King's ***Letter from Birmingham Jail.***

4. Search for Meaning in the Universe

Central Figure: Albert Camus

Essential Question: *Do we live in an indifferent universe?* ***Context***: Creation Myths, Job, Ecclesiastes, The Koran, Buddhism, Taoism, St. Augustine, Newman, Nietzsche, Weil, Sartre, Einstein, Sagan. ***Application***: Existentialism, Christian fundamentalism; Western, Mid-eastern and Eastern religous contributions.
Camus' ***Myth of Sisyphus and The Rebel.***

COR II IDEAS AND EXPRESSION IN THE ARTS

1. Expressing the Physical World: Realism to Abstraction

Central Figure: Pablo Picasso

Essential Question: *Why did artists stop trying to mirror the world objectively and turn to abstraction?* ***Context***: Greek sculpture, Dutch and English landscape (Rembrandt and Turner), Impressionism (Monet, Seurat), Post-Impressionism (Cezanne, Van Gogh), Picasso and the Cubists; African primitivism, Japanese prints; Surrealism (Dali) and Pop Art (Lichtenstein). ***Application*** : Similar movements in the other arts; readings from Stein, Hemingway, Woolf, Joyce; Strauss' *Don Juan,* Debussy's *Piano Preludes,* Schoenberg's *Piano Concerto,* Webern's *Five Orchestra Pieces Opus 10,* Cage's *Aria.*

2. Expressing The Human Condition: Symbolism

Central Figure: Franz Kafka

Essential Question: *How has artistic form and style changed to express the theme of the alienation of the individual?* ***Context***: Exploration of the human condition has roots in Greek tragedy, in *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, in *Candide*. In addition to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, stories by Melville, Faulkner, Gilman, Dinesen, Mansfield, O'Connor, Oates, Camus, Borges, Marquez. ***Application***: Picasso's *Guernica*, paintings by Munch and the German Expressionists; the novels *Clockwork Orange* by Burgess and *Childhood's End* by Clarke, as well as the film *Clockwork Orange* by Kubrick, films of Bergman, Hitchcock, Fellini; plays by Pinter and Albee; Berg's *Wozzeck*, Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*.

3. Authority and the Individual: The Drama of Protest

Central Figure: Wole Soyinka

Essential Question: *How does art interact with and influence political and social institutions?* ***Context***: Drama and film are central, starting with *Lysistrata*, Shakespeare, readings from Voltaire, Dickens, Pound, Auden, Eliot, Ginsburg, Ferlinghetti, Camus, Vonnegut, Gordimer, Morrison and Timmerman. ***Application:*** Soyinka and African drama, O'Casey, Lowell, Betti, Brecht; works of Llosa, Rama Rau; poetry of Neruda; the films *El Norte*, *Gospel According to St. Matthew*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*: paintings by Delacroix and Goya, Social Realism (Mexican and Soviet); Negro Spirituals, Labor Songs, Music of the 60's, Penderecki, *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*.

4. The Beautiful and the Sublime

Central Figure: Emily Dickinson

Essential Question: *Does art reflect or create beauty and goodness in the world?* ***Context:*** This section could review all the others and place them in this wider context. A central reading is Dostoevsky's *The Grand Inquisitor*; Dante, Milton, Blake, Baudelaire; Whitman and Dickinson. ***Application***; Modern poets such as Stevens, Ammons, Cummings; works by Anouilh, Beckett, Nabokov, Singer, Murdoch; the films *2001 Space Odyssey*, *The Seventh Seal*, *Resurrection*, *Waiting for Godot*; Mahler's *Fifth Symphony*, Mozart's *Requiem*, Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, Bach's *Preludes*.

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